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ABSTRACT

A task of regional educational laboratories is to provide information to state and local education policy makers. The new focus on policy reflects a change in the labs' knowledge base and audience. The subsequent move into the political arena has created risks for the labs, which have responded to the new task in different ways. The nature of the knowledge base used by labs as they interact with policymakers is examined in this paper. Suggestions for improving lab effectiveness in the policy arena are also offered. A content analysis of the lab publications in the ERIC database indicates that the most prevalent types of documents included in the knowledge base are issue tracking systems, "conditions of education"-type documents, policy-relevant original research, studies of existing policies, literature reviews with policy options, and "think pieces." Topics covered, in order of importance, include teachers and teaching policy, at-risk youth, rural education, early childhood education, and school restructuring. Lab publications are generally useful, with the exception of misleading references to audiences as "policymakers." If labs are to be effective disseminators of policy information, they must be willing to take controversial stands, not in the partisan sense, but with the understanding that decisions in a democratic society are political. (15 references) (LMI)

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THE KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR STATE POLICY:

STATUS, NEEDS, AND TRENDS

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When the US Department of Education issued the first request for proposals for competition for regional educational laboratories in almost two decades, a task was included that reflected both a longstanding interest and a frustration of the research arm of the department. The task was to provide information to state and local education policy makers. Including a focus on the policy arena reflected a change in the work of the labs, both in the knowledge base on which they draw and, even more so, the audiences with which they interact. The change required some labs to hire new staff, individuals with different interests and skills from those traditionally associated with labs. It also required that labs move into the political arena and created risks for them.

The labs responded to the challenge in different ways. Although one can always argue that the different responses reflect regional differences, it is also true that the different responses reflect the particular history of a lab (if there was a history) and ;the interests and personality of lab leadership. Whatever the cause, the responses included providing research-based paper documents to a select mailing list, holding "policy seminars" for interested parties, developing networks of policy makers, developing policy-relevant summaries of data, and performing policy analyses on demand. This paper will focus first on the nature of the knowledge base used by labs as they work with state policy makers. The conclusion, however, will raise a more problematic issue--how labs can be most effective in the policy arena on the regional and state levels.

The Knowledge Base

In order to determine the nature of the knowledge based used by regional labs in their work with policy makers, I shared Barbara Lieb-Brilhart's ERIC search of lab products. I also had collected the policy-focused newsletters and the policy briefs produced by the labs. My set may be missing some particular items, but it reflects lab activity in the policy arena. The analysis that follows is based primarily on those sources. However, my own experience in labs and conversations with colleagues in other labs indicates that some "policy work" is quick turn around and the paper trail (if it exists) is letters and other less public media. Therefore, the "objective" information--from ERIC and the lab documents--will be supplemented by my knowledge of what has occurred over the last five years. Although individual labs are associated with particular products in the following section, there is no implication that they are the only labs producing that type of product. The examples are illustrative. Further, there is no effort to determine the source of funding for the work--although most was supported through the regional lab contract with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, some was funded through state and other sources. Finally, I accepted the labs' designation of a piece of work as "policy oriented" despite the fact that in a number of cases, I disagreed with the designation. The issue of whether a particular document is rightfully classified as policy-oriented will be returned to in the conclusion.

Types of documents. The materials in ERIC and in the lab publications fall into a number of categories. First, there are numerous databases, ranging from issue tracking systems (e.g., SEDL and SEIL) to "Conditions of Education"-type documents (e.g., AEL's "The Condition of Rural Education in Kentucky: A Profile). SEDL, for example, has developed "SEDL-SCAN [which] offers policy makers lead time on crises by flagging emerging issues, anticipating societal developments, encouraging widespread constituent involvement, and integrating a vast array of data for political and fiscal decision making" (Pollard and Rood, 1989). At SEIL, there is an electronic data base with over 2,000 educational reform references. The "Conditions of Education" type of documents provide basic information about such items as numbers of students enrolled school, attendance rates, school spending, etc. Related to both types of

documents are those that provide information about how data bases are and might be used (e.g., NWREL).

A second type of document is original research that is designed to be policy relevant. SEIL, for example, annually sponsors "An Analysis of the Comparability of Teachers' Salaries to the Earnings of Other College Graduates in the Southeast" (Bird, 1986, 1987, 1988). RBS implemented field research in ten urban comprehensive high schools to "explore the commitment of students and teachers to the educational enterprise" (Firestone, et. al., 1989). The results of the study led to recommendations for policies that would adjust district and school factors to increase commitment. A study was undertaken at the Far West Lab to "assess the possibilities and limitations of staff development as an instrument of state and local policy for improving educational quality in the public schools in California" (Little, et. al., 1987).

Occasionally, labs study existing policies. Much of this work is reporting state activities on a given topic (see below), but some labs have implemented studies in the field of the effects of a given state policy. For example, RBS contrasted the effects of two states' approaches to testing (Corbett and Wilson, 1987), a "downstream" study to use Mitchell's term. At McREL, Marzano analyzed "Policy Constraints to the Teaching of Thinking" (1988).

Perhaps the most common sort of document produced by the labs is one that synthesizes research on a given topic and then provides policy options. Many of the examples also include a list of policies in place in the states served by the lab that produced the document. The range of topics for these papers is broad, inlcuding teacher incentives (Dornan, 1987), poor minority children in rural areas (Conklin and Olson, 1988), early childhood education (Conklin, et. al., 1989), dropouts, (Fennimore, 1989), etc. These documents are research-based and are intended to provide information before policies are made--what Mitchell calls the upstream work.

Finally, the labs produce policy-relevant "think pieces." These tend to draw on research, but go beyond to provide policy makers with a framework for thinking about the issue. An example of a think piece is "Restructuring Education: Community and Organizational Change" by McCune in McREL's *Policy Notes* (1989). Another example is "A Beginning Look at the What and How of Restructuring" (Harvey and Crandall, 1988), in which the authors explore provide both a scenario of an "ideally restructured school" and an outline of eight critical restructuring components.

The labs provide information to policy makers through seminars, network meetings, personal visits, letters, and telephone calls as well as through print materials. Unfortunately, it is impossible to analyze the knowledge base distributed through those methods. Such approaches are likely to be as, if not more, effective than the print materials. Consequently, our lack of knowledge of the "what" that is in those communications renders any discussion of the knowledge base for policy making used be the labs somewhat suspect!

Topics: The focus of the first section was on the types of knowledge and the forms in which they were communicated. This very brief section provides an overview of the topics that were addressed by the labs. Its brevity is due to the fact that the public record regarding topics is skewed by lab decisions unrelated to the topics. For example, if one lab decides to publish all papers delivered at a state policy seminar and another just the highlights, it would look as if the topic of the first seminar received more attention than did the topic of the second seminar. It is also true that some labs decided to concentrate on one or two policy issues, at least in the early years of the policy programs, while others decided to work on more topics. Obviously, there is

a relationship between the number of topics and the type of document produced--original research takes longer than research synthesis. With those caveats in mind, what follows is a brief discussion of the topics that were addressed by the labs.

The most frequently addressed topics related to teachers and teaching policy. Within that broad area, attention was paid to salaries, recruitment, supply and demand, assessment, and certification issues. The heavy emphasis on teachers and teaching policy is in part a result of the fact that the Southeastern Lab updates the study of teacher salaries each year and that NCREL focused a significant portion of its policy work on incentives for teaching. However, most of the labs addressed teaching issues, reflecting state policy interest in the area.

The second most frequently addressed topic was at-risk youth. Labs published documents concerned with dropouts and dropout prevention. They also provided information about student mobility as a risk factor and policies that could mitigate the negative effects. Substance abuse and drug, sex, and health education also received attention from the labs.

There was equal attention to rural education issues and to early childhood education. Documents concerned with rural education included the presentation of data, think pieces on the context of rural education, syntheses and policy analyses focusing on poor, minority students in rural settings, curriculum, and special concerns for instructional delivery through such arrangements as distance learning and consortia. The number of documents concerned with rural education reflects, I believe, the fact that the labs have received special funding for rural education, and one of the tasks within that allocation involves providing information on the status of rural education in each region.

The documents concerned with early childhood began showing up in 1988. This reflects the growing concern on the policy level with pre-kindergarten education. The information presented is "upstream" in nature, depicting the status of early childhood education in the region, synthesizing research, and providing policy options. The early childhood arena is an excellent example of the responsiveness of labs to the changing policy interests in the states. The labs seem to be "on time" with the information--neither too early nor too late. Further, for the most part, the information presented is well-rooted in research and appropriately critical in portraying what research demonstrates about the utility of early childhood education.

The final "hot topic" that crosses regions is the governance and structure of schooling. These documents respond to current interest in school restructuring, but vary greatly in how it is approached. Some labs have synthesized the research on school governance and the locus of decision making. Others, under the same rubric, present the views of "futurists" to argue for restructured schools. Still others analyze the issues and provide a framework for thinking about policy related to restructuring. Finally, most summarize the steps the states have taken and/or major national restructuring efforts.

There are many more topics covered, but each by only one lab and frequently by only one document. The topics range from home instruction to policies concerned with computer usage to gifted and talented--and on. The very fact that there are so many "singletons" indicates the responsiveness to regional context.

Quality: Providing a serious judgment of the quality of the labs' policy-related documents is beyond the scope of this paper. It would require establishing a two-tiered review--one that focused on the question of whether the papers reflect the most current research related to the topic and another that queried policy makers about whether the form and content of the

information were useful to them. Absent such a process, the comments I will now make are personal judgments of the utility and value of the information.

First, more of the policy-related documents do draw on research than do not. I am not an expert in all the areas that were addressed, but a quick view of the citations indicates that the research tends to be current. In those areas in which there is debate in the research community, the documents provide all sides of the debate in fairly straightforward summary terms. Second, the approach of summarizing the research, providing alternatives for policy development, and listing the names of key individuals in each state has a face appeal.

As I indicated above, I accepted the statement of audience from ERIC or from the labs' title for the newsletter. In many instances, "policy makers" were listed as one of a number of audiences (e.g., "this paper is intended for teachers, administrators, and policy makers"). Further, the papers so designated generally were long and included information of no policy relevance. When a study yields information that has policy relevance along with other types of relevance, the policy information needs to be extracted and provided to policy makers alone. Sometimes, moreover, the claim that there is policy-relevant information stretches what the paper can be used for!

The Problem for the Future

Regional labs had, until 1985, worked with educators housed in schools and state education agencies. The key word in the previous sentence is "educators." The contracts that began in 1985 included the obligation to work with state and local policy makers, only some of whom are educators. Labs have provided r&d-based information to those policy makers, summarized policies across states, studied the impact of various policies, and developed and shared frameworks for thinking about issues in policy terms. Whether these actions have an impact on state policy cannot be determined from a study of the knowledge base itself, and the question of impact frames this section of the paper;.

The world of r&d is a world in which neutral portrayal of information is generally valued. For the most part, the lab documents provide such neutral information. This is not to say that there is not at least implicit espousal of particular approaches--everyone is for dropout prevention, the teaching of higher order thinking skills, and restructured schools. What is lacking, except for rare examples, are analyses of existing policy that might inhibit the achievement of the goals that are espoused. The fact that the labs have tended to concentrate on the "upstream" issues rather than the "downstream" impacts is illustrative of the general timidity of the policy work. Marzano's analysis of policies that interfere with teaching thinking and the work at RBS on the effects of state testing policies stand out as examples of policy work that contrasts with the general type of activity.

Where labs take a stand, there tends to be an abstractness to it. Much of the work on restructuring, for example, provides information about why (in a macro sense) restructuring is necessary and examples of restructuring efforts that are currently in place. What tends to be missing is a discussion of how policies and practices need to change--what the implications of restructuring are for certification of specialists, for example.

I believe that this avoidance of controversy is understandable and rooted in the history of labs. However, labs need to confront the fact that working in the policy arena involves risks. Within states, the governor, the legislature, and the chief state school officer are not always on the same side. Even neutral information can create ill will. If labs are to be effective in working in the area of policy, they need to be willing to risk being the target of the ill will--and OERI

needs to be supportive of the risk. What the goal of labs with regard to policy should be, I believe, is to be seen as honest and courageous information providers--not political in the partisan sense but understanding and living out a value that in a democratic society, decisions are political.

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